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The Super-Spy Behind the Pollard Case

Among the espionage cases that shook the Washington establishment last year, none was more surprising than the revelation that Jonathan Jay Pollard, a civilian intelligence analyst for the Navy, had been spying for Israel.

After first denying that Pollard had been furnishing them with secrets, embarrassed Israeli officials admitted the charges and allowed U.S. investigators to interrogate the Israeli Embassy personnel involved.

The mystery man behind the Pollard caper was a swashbuckling super-spy, Rafi Eitan (not to be confused with former chief of staff of the Israeli army, Rafael Eitan). He has served his country effectively in the shadowy world of espionage and covert operations for over 35 years.

Those who know Eitan well assured us that he would never intentionally harm the United States or deliberately endanger U.S.-Israeli cooperation. But he is an Israeli patriot first and has never shrunk from using extreme methods to achieve his goals, regardless of legal or diplomatic niceties. In this case, he was after technological information that he felt was vital to Israel's security.

It's not widely known, but Eitan was responsible for one of Israel's intelligence's most famous coups: the tracking, capture and kidnaping of Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann in Buenos Aires 25 years ago. The operation was undeniably illegal and caused an outcry from the Argentine government.

Eitan's mentor, Issar Harel, then chief of Israeli intelligence, told the story of the Eichmann capture in a book, "The House on Garibaldi Street." Harel identified the agent-in-charge by his code-name,

Gabi, but our associate Lucette Lagnado has learned that he was Eitan.

Gabi/Eitan was put in charge of the Eichmann mission, and he supervised every detail, from setting up the safe house and tracking Eichmann's every move, to snatching him on the streets of suburban Buenos Aires and smuggling him to Israel. Eichmann was hanged after a trial that revealed him as the unrepentant technician who arranged for the transportation of millions of European Jews to the death camps.

Another Nazi fugitive on Gabi/Eitan's list was Dr. Josef Mengele, the "Angel of Death" who decided whether Jews at Auschwitz were gassed immediately or consigned to the living hell of his experiments.

In fact, while Eichmann was being interrogated in the Buenos Aires safe house, one of the key bits of information the Israelis pried out of him was Mengele's address in Argentina. However, the address was cold; Mengele had moved.

After taking Eichmann to Israel, Eitan returned to South America to continue the search for Mengele. His team of agents located the doctor in a hideout in Paraguay. With characteristic coolness, Eitan weighed the odds of a successful attack on the villa and decided they were too great: There was a substantial chance of failure, and even if the Israeli commando team could overpower Mengele's Paraguayan guards, it would be a bloody operation. The plan was dropped.

Eitan is skeptical that the bones unearthed last year were Mengele's. He believes it was a hoax and assumes that Mengele is still living—in Paraguay.